TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT: PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF EARLY ACCESS TO NURSERY PROVISION

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of early access to nursery provision on children and parents, specifically focusing on the Sheffield Early Learning Community. By examining the perspectives of parents and carers, the study aimed to shed light on the benefits and challenges associated with providing nursery places for children from their second birthday. The findings in this report will inform policymakers and practitioners about the positive impact of early learning opportunities and support for parents and offer recommendations to further enhance support for children's development and parental wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

In England the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017) is the phase of education and care for children from birth to age five, finishing at the end the academic year in which children turn five. Within the EYFS the UK government funds free nursery places for up to 30 hours per week in term-time for children aged three to four years, and 15 hours per week for children aged two-three years for parents receiving certain benefits. These places, referred to as Free Early Learning (FEL), are offered from the term after the child's second or third birthday. This study took place within the Sheffield Early Learning Community, based in the wards of Burngreave, Firthpark and Shiregreen & Brightside. Here levels of child poverty are particularly high which can have a devastating impact on children's early learning and development. Challenges with children's early speech language and communication and social and emotional development have put significant pressure on services across the three wards.

Through the Sheffield Early Learning Community partners are working together to tackle the causes, not just the symptoms, of poor early learning outcomes in this area. Sheffield Hallam University and Save the Children, working in partnership with Sheffield City Council, Sheffield Children's NHS Foundation Trust, Watercliffe Meadow Primary School, along with many third sector and community organisations to help bring about systems-change for young children and their families.

This study explores how parents and carers perceive the effects of a practice change in the Early Learning Community. The change allows families to access early nursery placements for their children offered from the date of their child's second birthday.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This study's aim was to examine parents and carers' perceptions of early access to nursery provision in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. Extensive research has shown that early access to high quality nursery provision has a transformative impact on a range of child and parental outcomes (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2021; Melhuish et al., 2017; Balladares and Kankaras 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Similarly, the quality of interactions between practitioners and parents and carers has also been shown to be particularly significant, not just in terms of children's outcomes, but for supporting healthier relationships between parents / carers and school in the longer term (Taggert et al., 2015; Wolfson & King, 2008).

Sheffield Hallam University developed the Early Years Community Research Centre (EYCRC) nursery, in an area of socio-economic challenge. It was developed in partnership with a local primary school, the Local Authority and Save the Children UK. The nursery opened in April 2021 and prioritised offering two-year Free Early Learning places, as there was no other provider of this service. In autumn 2021, Save the Children UK received a philanthropic donation which was used by the EYCRC to bring forward children's start date to their second birthday, rather than the following term which is when the government funded place would normally start. This funding was also used to support full days of nursery provision for some children. In June 2022, a team of researchers from Hallam conducted interviews with parents to explore the impact of this provision. This study highlights how positive relationships between children, parents / carers and practitioners facilitated the children's learning and development and the parent's and carers' well-being. The study used qualitative interviews with parents to elicit their views and perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted within the nursery and parents were invited to take part, supported by a nursery worker they trusted if required**.** The interviews were transcribed, then analysed as a group to draw out key themes. The findings revealed a significant impact on children and families who accessed this service.

The Participants

The participants were five nursery parents and carers who were representative of the families who used the nursery provision.

- P1 – Father with two children under 3. Family has English as an Additional Language
- P2 - Grandmother with three-year-old child and two-year-old grandchild in her care
- P3 - Grandmother with two-year-old child and two-year-old grandchild in her care
- P4 – Mother with one child
- P5 - Mother, single parent with two children

KEY FINDINGS

The study's key findings revolve around two main themes: the impact of change on children and parents, and the significance of relationships. These relationships covered those between the practitioners and children and families, the relationship between parents / carers and child and the relationships that developed between parents and carers themselves.

Change for Children

Parents reported improved independence skills, including in children's ability to dress and feed themselves. There was also an emphasis on the improvements in children's social skills, enabling them to make friendships with other children and to bond with the nursery practitioners. These skills led to children enjoying their time in nursery with parents providing examples of reduced anxiety in their child. Other key areas of change were in improved communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, and increased physical skills including walking, climbing, and playing on wheeled toys.

> *"Smiling, talking. He is not getting scared like before. Yes, even with adults now. Before if I take him like one of my friends comes for a greeting or whatever he just goes behind me, whereas now he just is stood like normal."* (P1)

> *"Because he used to scream you know, like some sort of anxiety when I left, and how he will walk me down and he's happy to go in and that makes me happy, that he's fine, he's safe and I can leave it."* (P4)

> *"But for Jake it's helped him in his development. He is not really – he can't really say much words, he still can't but I'm noticing he is trying to talk."* (P4)

> *"Yes, she is more confidence. She will climb and she has picked stuff up. Like the nursery slide is higher than what she's got at home, and so her confidence with climbing and running and jumping and stuff like that."* (P2)

Change for Parents

The changes experienced by parents and carers were as significant as those of the children. They told us that access to the nursery place had supported them in the wake of the pandemic and with the impact of the economic challenges they faced. The interviews

highlighted improved mental health experienced by parents and carers as a result of the support they received and the connections they made at nursery. These positive experiences in turn reduced their anxiety, which had been exacerbated by the pandemic. The nursery place had also acted as a conduit for the parents and carers to access to information about support services and help with their finances and had provided new opportunities for learning and work.

> *"And because she likes it because of what she sees, and the development of even her child. She thinks 'Oh that's great, that's a good job'."* (P1) (Father talking about how the child's mother was now looking at training in childcare)

> *"Because of Wendy coming here, I am looking to either going back in to work or applying for a university place."* (P5)

> *"It means I get time on my own, because I'm a single parent and I've got two children, and Molly is my granddaughter, but I've got her full time, so obviously I've had no time whatsoever. Nobody takes then overnight or anything, so I don't get a break. So having this nursery place earlier, for Molly, is just- it's made me feel better, and I'm not on high alert 24/7."* (P3)

> *"Before I got this nursery place, I was really like overwhelmed. A bit stressed, and I came to the school – which then introduced me to there here, and yeah, I just didn't know where to go and I was feeling like I had a lot, well I did have a lot on me and I could just release that to people and sort of feel a little bit better."* (P5)

Relationships

The EYCRC nursery emphasises the importance of positive, trusting, loving relationships within effective early years practice. The motto for the nursery is 'Changing Lives through Relationships'. This approach is based on trauma informed practice, which highlights the importance of creating a physically and psychologically safe space where parents and carers feel empowered to give their child the best possible start in life. This focus on building and supporting positive relationships was reflected in the importance parents and carers placed on relationships in the interviews.

Parents reported that as a result of their child coming to nursery pressure on the family had eased, and it had had a positive impact on the parent-child relationship and the overall family dynamic. Parent and carers also valued the relationships they developed with practitioners within the nursery team as they provided support and practical advice on issues and official forms. Parents and carers also appreciated the practitioners' professionalism, and they became a trusted person to talk to about their concerns and worries.

> *"She will tell you when she wants something, she will tell you if she needs something, and she has just become an absolute delight."* (P5)

> *"We've all got our routine. Wendy has got her routine; she knows what she's doing on set days and Aidan goes to school and then we all just seem happier."* (P5)

> *"They love it, which means I'm settled, and the staff are great. But yeah, and they are always willing to help out in any which way they can."* (P3)

Lastly, parents and carers talked positively about how the nursery place had been a catalyst for them to build networks and connections with others, which provided them with another form of support. Parents and carers were able to learn from each other and develop friendships within their community. These friendships also led to social opportunities for the children outside of nursery, and parents were able to offer practical support such as looking after each other's children.

> *"So quite a few parents have been like 'Listen, if you need me to have them for an hour while you do this on a Wednesday that's fine – quite a few people have offered, like if you need me to watch Wendy on a Wednesday for a few hours, if you do find a job that you need to work on a Wednesday I don't mind helping out. So, we have all just, it's just flourished from there, sort of thing. Like I say, it doesn't have to be anything full on, it's just nice to know that you've got friends there."* (P5)

> *"I don't usually like making friends. I've got social anxiety but quite a few of the mums here that I talk to, they go to breakfast club now, so I sit with them."* (P2)

> *"My wife, she doesn't have a lot of friends, but now she can bring Raheel or take Raheel, she is always chatting with the people waiting."* (P1)

> *"Yeah, sit and have a chat with my friends. Thursday mornings I get my breakfast cooked. I get looked after as well, so yeah."* (P3)

Wider Impacts

Families shared that accessing the nursery helped them to recover from the impacts of the COVID pandemic. They highlighted the importance of opportunities to network and socialise for themselves and their children, and also access to financial information and practical help with resources e.g., Save the Children grants and Baby Basics packages. The development of new peer-to-peer support networks for parents through the contacts they made at nursery

were particularly supportive of parent and carer's mental health. As their confidence grew, there was also a growing appetite for new learning opportunities and activities for parents and carers.

> *"I mean I feel more myself now. Obviously when we were in lockdown, I lost myself totally. I was just a mum that was trying to protect her children. I think that we all got into a rut being in the house, staying in pyjamas days on end. There was no reason to get dressed. There was no reason to go out. and I think that I really suffered with my anxiety bad in lockdown – just for the simple fact of being so scared that my children were going to get poorly, I cut everybody off."* (P5)

> *"And it was good, and to be honest, without the help of Laura we cannot make it, but she helped us a lot too. Because I am working full time but I'm not making that much. I couldn't claim universal credit but even though my wife is in ….it means that she can't claim any kind of benefit after she has settlement status. That took like five years."* (P1)

CONCLUSION

In keeping with other research studies, the findings from this small-scale study highlight the positive and far-reaching impacts parents report when they have access to high quality provision for their children from the age of two. A Scottish study (Woolfson and King, 2008) of nursery provision for two-year-olds from vulnerable families across three local authorities, found that the intervention group of parents and carers experienced a significantly improvement in their response to the daily 'hassle' of parenting. This was the result of learning new skills for managing their children's behaviour and having different expectations and understanding of their children's behaviour. They also felt the benefit of having some time to themselves.

> *"Changing parents' behaviour towards their children and enhancing parenting capacity is likely to be a highly important outcome for impacting on children's development in the longer term."* (Woolfson and King, 2008, p. 4)

The parents and carers in this study appear to have new-found optimism, energy and positive engagement with their children and with other parents. This can be attributed to their access to the nursery place and the support provided by the nursery practitioners. This positive impact provides some key areas for policy consideration as it highlights the importance of:

- **Adequate funding of two-year provision,** as many settings in disadvantaged areas cannot deliver quality provision that adequately meets the needs of children at the current funding levels. The provision in this study was subsidised by Save the Children UK and Sheffield Hallam University. One suggested approach would be to increase funding rates for free hours to the level set for providers in receipt of the maintained sector supplement.

- **Increasing funded hours for two-year-olds and under-twos to 30 hours per week, and extending the free hours offer from 38 to 48 weeks of the year**. This increase would enable parents and carers to access training and take-up work. Extending the period in adequately funded, quality nursery provision would also improve outcomes for children. The guaranteed longer hours would also improve the sustainability of nursery provision in disadvantaged areas.
- **Community nursery provision in areas of disadvantage addressing the holistic needs of children and families** so that they can access services for their child and themselves in one place through organisations they trust. Nurseries see families twice a day, five days a week, and with sufficient funding, could address challenges that families are facing before they escalate. By expanding the additional 15 free hours to children under-two and starting eligibility from the end of paid parental leave, this relationship could be built sooner and for more families.
- **Trauma informed practice in the early years** to foster positive, non-judgemental relationships that support and empower parents and carers to build the confidence and skills to support their child effectively.
- **Supporting different forms of partnerships** to address specific community needs, as in the case of the Sheffield Early Learning Community.

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